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Reducing Child Protection Error in Social Work: Towards an Holistic-Rational Perspective

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Reducing Child Protection Error in Social Work: Towards an Holistic-Rational Perspective

Abstract

Social work in the United Kingdom remains embroiled in concerns about child protection error. The serious injury or death of vulnerable children continues to evince much consternation in the public and private spheres. Governmental responses to these concerns invariably draw on technocratic solutions involving more procedures, case management systems, information technology and bureaucratic regulation. Such solutions flow from an implicit use of instrumental rationality based on a 'means-end' logic. While bringing an important perspective to the problem of child protection error, instrumental rationality has been overused limiting discretion and other modes of rational inquiry. This paper argues that the social work profession should apply an enlarged form of rationality comprising not only the instrumental-rational mode but also the critical-rational, affective-rational and communicative-rational forms. It is suggested that this combined, conceptual arsenal of rational inquiry leads to a gestalt which has been termed the holistic-rational perspective. It is also argued that embracing a more rounded perspective such as this might offer greater opportunities for reducing child protection error.

Key words: risk, rationality, child protection error

Introduction

Risk in child protection work continues to exercise the minds of social work practitioners and the public alike. Despite over forty years of inquiry reports in the United Kingdom, investigating the serious harm or death of vulnerable children, professional errors recur on a scale that is dumbfounding to the lay observer (Reder & Duncan, 2004). As a consequence, child protection and risk continue to remain high on the political agenda. What is more, technocratic solutions in child protection (no matter how well intentioned) - in the form of a burgeoning infrastructure of administrative requirements (Parton, 2008; Pithouse et al, 2009) - have not quelled public and political concern as new tragedies are reported repeatedly in the media (Reder & Duncan, 2004; Munro, 2005). Such solutions

have been implemented in several Anglophile and European countries (Lonne et al, 2009, Kuijvenhoven & Kortleven, 2010) and generated by social forces within the ‘risk society’ including neo-liberal policies of welfare modernisation (Webb, 2006). In all of this, risk can neither be completely predicted nor prevented. Clearly, professionals cannot monitor family interaction on a constant basis. Secrecy and subterfuge feature in some families where serious harm to children is suspected. Risk is a ‘slippery’ concept, one that is hard to pin down with precision (Kemshall, 2010).

I argue in this paper that, while there is no indubitable panacea for child protection error, there are ways of potentially reducing it through forms of wide-ranging, rational inquiry. These forms build collectively into (what I have termed) an *holistic-rational* approach. Its purpose is to help social workers mitigate skewed emotion, bias and internal prejudice while promote critical thinking and reflection (Munro, 2007). Instituting technocracy to tackle child protection error has its place but is a piecemeal solution. Change must be more wide ranging than this and occur at the cognitive level, as shown in the capacity to analyse, problem-solve, generate hypotheses and reach credible decisions (Munro, 2007). It must also happen at the affective level as realised in a greater psycho-dynamic awareness of the emotional impact of child protection work (Cooper, 2005; Rustin, 2005; Howe, 2008). Social workers must additionally reflect on the ethical dilemmas inherent in safeguarding the welfare of children and families (Lonne et al, 2009). Rational inquiry into these areas must, furthermore, be communicated effectively through explicit argumentation (Duffy, 2011).

Reder and Duncan (2004) capture this notion of an holistic appropriation of rationality by arguing that, ‘different permutations of reasoning and different types of information are required, depending on context, so that an integration is needed’ (p. 109). Slovic and Finucane (2004) support this contention by stressing that experiential thinking (which is holistic, visceral and affective) needs to combine with analytic thinking (which appropriates logic) in risk formulation. This is a matter of moving beyond what Simon (1996) refers to as ‘bounded rationality’: a person’s restricted use of rationality in their everyday world.

The argument put forward in this paper seeks, consequently, to complement a range of alternative approaches to the investigation of child protection error that focus on systemic forms of analysis and change (Rustin, 2004; SCIE, 2008); language awareness (Hall & Slembrouck, 2009); education and training interventions (Balen & Masson, 2008); and the transfer of knowledge from commercial sectors dealing with risk (Johnson & Petrie, 2004). It also builds on Munro's (2011) landmark report into child protection where a more rounded approach to analysis and reflection was advocated. If forty years of analysis have not yielded sufficient improvement in outcomes in child protection, then we must dare to think 'outside the technocratic box'.

To develop this inquiry, I posit that there are four key perspectives on rationality (see Figure 1 below), all of which have some bearing on child protection practice, namely the: (a) critical-rational perspective (b) instrumental-rational perspective (c) communicative-rational perspective and (d) affective-rational perspective. It is contended that all four are necessary in the attempt to reduce child protection error - as a running case study adduces. Collectively, they form an over-arching, *holistic-rational perspective*, one that can be adopted in the everyday messiness of real-world, child protection.

PLACE FIGURE 1 HERE

Perspectives on Rationality in Child Protection

The Critical-Rational Perspective

The child abuse inquiries highlighted various blocks and biases affecting the recognition of child abuse – all of which have implications for critical thinking (Department of Health, 1991). Let us briefly consider a few of them. First, is the 'known but not fully appreciated'. Here, there can be difficulties in classifying information or distinguishing it from a flood of relevant data – for example, discerning physical abuse in a sequence of multifarious concerns about child welfare. Second, is the failure to distinguish fact from opinion. This can lead to information being misconstrued or result in faulty premises about risk which then generate ill-conceived protection plans. Unappreciated data, is a

third example. For instance, information may not be appreciated if its source is not valued. If the person who instigates a referral is not trusted then there is danger that important views will be discounted. Another example, fourthly, is the ‘decoy of dual pathology’. This is where information can be known but not appreciated if the receiver is side-tracked by a different problem. A typical example of this occurs when there is an inordinate focus on one family member which then detracts from a consideration of other actors.

All of the afore-mentioned blocks to recognition are understandable as allegations of child abuse are often convoluted and complex. Munro (2007) adds to this list by highlighting how professionals resort to cognitive heuristics. These are short hand methods, or ‘rules of thumb’, for processing complex information. For instance, a social worker under pressure to conform to time limits within an initial investigation of child sexual abuse, might intuitively apply the *availability heuristic* (Kahneman et al., 1999) and make a judgement on the basis of previous information that is readily available. Hence, information to hand (such as files, reports and other sources) may ostensibly affect perception.

Many of these tendentious blocks and biases can be recognized and dealt with through a critical-rational perspective. Here, one attempts to use rationality to discern, analyse and evaluate information, judgements, arguments, and decisions. Critical-rationality relies, therefore, on a set of cognitive skills, intellectual standards and keen traits of mind. It is a disposition or intellectual commitment to use mental processes to improve thinking and judgement, minimise bias and guide behaviour. A well cultivated thinker will raise vital questions, gather and assess relevant information, arrive at well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, think open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, and use reason to problem-solve. Crucially, critical rationality enables the thinker to identify the implicit, taken-for-granted *premises* underpinning formulations about risk, to seek for supportive evidence and, where this is lacking, construct alternative hypotheses that can be tested later on. Philosophically, it draws on the Socratic method of posing questions in a deliberative manner: questions that aim at clarification, that probe assumptions, reasons

and evidence; questions that scrutinise implications and consequences (Gambrill, 2013). In all of this, the concepts of ‘respectful uncertainty’ and ‘healthy scepticism’ remain sacrosanct and lie at the heart of thoughtful planning and decision-making in child protection. Various studies have highlighted the importance of these two cognitive dispositions in proactive case management (Farmer & Lutman, 2009; Wade et al, 2010).

Let us consider these points in more detail. In long-term child protection cases, there is a danger that untested premises about risk will be handed down to (and adopted by) successive generations of case workers. In this context, we know there is a high rate of attrition in staffing in children services. Given what has been said, the following (fictitious) scenario is not atypical. A newly qualified social worker is appointed to a very busy child protection team. Following a helpful induction period, she is allocated several child protection cases. One, in particular, has been open for ten years. The family comprises four children in total, all having multi-faceted needs. Both parents have unresolved care and control issues from their past. Previous concerns have centred on the children’s failure to meet key, developmental milestones. The team leader summarizes the issues for the social worker in an initial supervision session. The concerns are framed primarily in terms of physical neglect.

Two weeks after inheriting the case, the youngest child, aged eight, disappears from the home. The event is interpreted by the social worker in terms of a lack of parental supervision. The event happens again two weeks later and the child is returned home by the police. Again, this is put down to parental laxity. Hence, the overriding frame, or master-premise, is one of neglect, so this explanation for the child’s behaviour should come as no surprise. What is significant, here, is that the premise has been uncritically embraced by successive generations of social workers along with their team managers.

Yet, if critical-rationality was applied, it might question this taken-for-granted understanding. Could the two episodes of the child leaving home be interpreted as running away? What evidence might exist to support this alternative premise? Have the child’s older siblings also engaged in this behaviour? A comprehensive search through

the voluminous files on the family reveals records on the children's sexualised behaviour including the youngest child's inappropriate play when at school. Being open to an alternative premise, in this instance, through the application of a deliberative critical-rationality, could lead the social worker to refer the child to a specialist centre for further investigation. Such is the power of critical-rationality to entertain the possibility of alternative premises about the children's needs and behaviour.

This need for this perspective is also endorsed by Duffy (2011) when he appropriates Toulmin's (1958) explicit argumentation tool as a means of testing the validity of professional premises and arguments in child protection cases. The tool draws on, 'skills of critical thinking and reflective practice whereby the evidence that is being used in support of the proposed actions is scrutinised in a structured and systematic way for strengths and weaknesses' (p. 36). It comprises six stages of analytical inquiry that are set out in Figure 2 below. This analytical process reduces confirmation bias by seeking evidence to challenge one's favoured premise concerning risk.

PLACE FIGURE 2 HERE

The Instrumental-Rational Perspective

We will now consider the core tenets of the instrumental-rational perspective in child protection. Here, organisations harness bureaucracy, actuarial tools, procedures, regulation, information technology, and governance, in order to meet targets and manage risk. As can be seen, at the heart of this perspective lies a specific way of mastering the social world through a range of technocratic measures. Somewhat similar to Weber's (2010) notion of purposive rationality, instrumental-rationality refers to the achievement of a given end through the most effective and efficient means possible. Simply put, it is concerned with the rational organization of human life to achieve specific objectives. The focus is on the 'how' of action rather than the 'why'.

At this juncture, let us return to the case example referred to earlier in order to ground the perspective within a 'real-world' context. Significantly, following an investigative

interview, the specialist centre has come back with concerns: the child in question has made a hesitant disclosure of inappropriate touch, implicating various family members including her parents. Adopting the instrumental-rational perspective, the social worker becomes very conscious of the need to follow agreed agency procedures defining what actions to take in the light of suspected or confirmed child abuse. So, she immediately informs her team leader; a strategy discussion is then held with the police and other agencies; the need to protect the child (and her siblings) expeditiously is agreed having considered legal duties (under the relevant Statute) to safeguard and protect children at risk of significant harm; a case conference is eventually convened to appraise these events and develop a protection plan; and the parents informed of the agency's concerns and asked to respond. In all of this, timescales are of the essence. Actions are determined by established agency and legal protocols. The instrumental-rational mind-set becomes the mental foreground determining reactions to this critical disclosure of abuse.

Since the Maria Colwell Inquiry Report in 1973, and despite wide-ranging changes in policy and legislation, the child protection system in the UK has relied greatly on the instrumental-rational mindset for tackling child protection error and risk. There are good reasons behind this move. If we fail to develop (or dismantle) bureaucratic structures and procedures, we create a space for practice driven by whim, vagary, or idiosyncratic lurch. As Reder and Duncan (2004) opined, 'procedural, monitoring and organizational responses probably need to be accepted as understandable...necessary, first steps (p. 103). Professional discretion, without standardisation and consistency, does not necessarily lead to more enlightened thinking; in fact, it can result in bias and the misuse of power (Evans & Harris, 2004). Procedural guidance contains lessons that have been learnt from past errors. That said, many commentators are alarmed by the overuse of technocracy in child protection as reflected in an increasingly elaborate, Byzantine corpus of procedural requirements and computerised imperatives (Garrett, 2008; Parton, 2008; Lonne et al, 2009; Pithouse et al, 2009; Kemshall, 2010). As a consequence, relational care in social work has been occluded by a technological mind-set and professional evaluation colonised by the 'tick box' audit (Munro, 2008). Crucially, 'this creates dilemmas about which matters most, the child or the performance indicator' (Munro, 2005, p. 389).

To counter-balance this burgeoning, instrumental-rational perspective, we must use different forms of rationality to process emotion psycho-dynamically, develop critical thinking and enhance professional ethics in child protection. All these different applications must complement the instrumental-rational perspective in order to maximize our chances of reducing child protection error. Instrumental rationality has helpfully developed the child protection system but has also created an inordinate level of prescription, as Weber had forecast – and Munro has highlighted much more recently (2011). The danger, here, lies in continually expanding its hold rather than enhancing new landscapes of rational awareness. Our range of cognitive and affective tools needs to expand to offset the erosion of professional discretion and values that arises when instrumental-rational responses go awry. Social care professionals can fulfil the ‘letter of the procedural law’ in a resolute, assiduous way but, in doing so, forget its spirit (Wastell, 2010). Weber’s (1958, p. 182) view that the western bureaucrat is a ‘specialist without spirit, a sensualist without heart’ is very apposite for today’s world.

The Communicative-Rational Perspective

There is a central, recurring message from the inquiry reports. It refers to episodes of problematic, inter-professional communication during the management of complex cases of child maltreatment (Reder & Duncan, 2004). To reiterate, communication in this context can be examined gainfully through the work of Jürgen Habermas (1987). For this theorist, people put forward ‘validity claims’ when they ordinarily converse with each other. This is especially true in a child protection setting where meaning can be contentious. These claims are commitments that speakers make to justify what they have said and done. Typically, they are rational claims as to what is true, right, sincere and comprehensible. Any listener can, in principle, challenge these claims using *reasoned* argumentation to present counter-claims. The type of communication is driven by a communicative rationality, argues Habermas. Here, speakers strive for understanding, empathy and consensus on the basis of a rational appraisal of validity claims.

According to Habermas, speakers can jettison communicative rationality by becoming strategic in their verbal exchanges. Strategic utterances occur when one speaker forces his point home by using the power invested in his status or role. Consensus and reasoned argumentation are by-passed as a result. However, we know that when social workers adopt communicative rationality with parents in child protection, as opposed to its strategic manifestation, to reach a consensual understanding of the child's needs, then the outcomes for the child tend to be better (Cleaver & Freeman, 1995).

Importantly, for Habermas, communicative rationality is premised on ethical rules which restrict power in conversation. In other words, speakers should be allowed to vent their opinions, to change the agenda and to be fairly heard so that the only acceptable force is the force of better argument. Adopting egalitarian communication in child protection does not mean that social workers have to forgo making hard decisions contravening the expressed views of family members when, ultimately, the best interests of the child are at stake; but it does require them to be more open to a range of perspectives on what constitutes harm, need, risk, and supportive resources for families. Furthermore, communicative rationality, underpinned by the equality of speech, has a particular purchase for inter-professional communication. Evidence (DOH, 1991) from some of the inquiry reports has pointed to the salience of occupational discipline, hierarchy and status in subjugating some professional perspectives while elevating others.

The determination of thresholds for intervention remains as a deeply contested area in child protection (France et al, 2010; Masson, 2010). Because this is a socially constructed determination, and therefore open to bias, it is important that reasoned argumentation is employed when deliberating on the severity of risk. It is here that communicative-rationality plays such a vital role in joint assessments allowing health visitors, social workers and clinicians (amongst others) to present their validity claims about child care concerns, while holding in check the contaminating effects of power and professional ideology. For Habermas, everyone affected by a decision, should be allowed to speak, introduce new ideas or challenge, respectfully, another's point of view especially when it refers to contested areas such as parenting capacity.

Many ethical traditions rely on rationality as a key faculty. For Kant (1999), it was central to actions based on duty. Alternatively, for Utilitarians (for example, Mill, 2001), rationality was employed to calculate what was best for the majority. Adopting a different stance, Aristotle, thought reason was a tool for building the virtuous character and sustaining the moral life. Weber (2010), in contrast, believed that the technical-rational mind-set had suppressed value-laden rationality. In the more applied field of child protection, value-dilemmas abound. Reason has to be applied to these quandaries. Facts have to be gathered and analysed. Ethical communication must deliberate on the facts. Often, decisions have to be taken on the least detrimental option – but this has to be part of a reasoned decision, and one that is debated fairly.

In order to concretize these conceptual notions, let us return once more to our fictitious case study. Following further contact with the family and relevant agencies (such as the child's school), the social worker attends the initial child protection case conference. Here, she is reminded that her communication of the case, and analysis of risk, must be clear, sincere, truthful and reasoned. After all, she is the key worker with core responsibilities for promoting the best interests of the child. In this role, she has gathered information, reflected on facts and feelings, and reached an initial formulation on risks, needs and resources. In communicating this formulation to the conference, her intention is to have an open exchange with all present and affected by the eventual decision and plan. Moreover, the chair of the conference is aware from past experience that risk-laden meetings such as these can sometimes succumb to pressures to conform or reach consensus without a critical evaluation of different viewpoints: a phenomenon known as 'groupthink' (Janis, 1982). Hence, she is determined to base decision-making on reasoned claims, respectful challenge, inclusive dialogue and attempts to understand alternative points of view. In adopting these orientations, both the social worker and chair of the conference are drawing on communicative rationality.

The Affective-Rational Perspective

Those who have practiced in child and family social work will testify to the emotive nature of the work. Gross acts of child abuse evoke feelings of horror, sadness, fear and anger that can be processed helpfully through psycho-dynamic and systemic perspectives. Indeed, Harvey (2010) talks about the visceral nature of the work and maddening dynamics social workers face when dealing with complex cases of child sexual abuse. Another example of such dynamics occurs in the ‘Stockholm Syndrome’ where victims inadvertently identify and collude with an aggressor. It has been documented in child protection (Ferguson, 2005) indicating how a social worker might misidentify with a forceful caregiver – as a result of fear or uncertainty. In addition, social workers can be drawn into pernicious, relational dynamics with family members involving the roles of persecutor, rescuer and victim – what Burgess refers to as the ‘Drama Triangle’ (2005). All three positions involve some kind of *emotional discount*. For the persecutor, the discount is reflected in the view that the victim does not matter. For the rescuer, the discount accords with the mentality that the victim is unable to solve his problem. Alternatively, for the victim, it is the sense that he is confined to experience the imposed suffering.

In a related vein, it has been found that child protection practice invokes social defences against inner professional anxiety. Whittaker’s research (2011), for example, found that staff coped with their anxieties by ritualising their work through enacting procedures; repeatedly checking risk-laden steps with colleagues; and delegating risk upwards to line managers. His findings supported the pioneering work of Menzies-Lyth (1970) on nursing practice where similar fear reducing strategies were employed. Importantly, though, some of these defences maybe be permissible as long as they do not blur reality, minimise responsibility or negate professional development.

Margaret Rustin’s (2005) psychoanalytical analysis of events in the life of Victoria Climbié builds on these themes. Rustin opines that the caseworkers (understandably) defended themselves from the pain of Victoria’s suffering. For them, it was a matter of avoiding mental discomfort and anxiety by employing defence mechanisms and

psychological reactions such as mirroring, dissociation, counter-transference, projection and splitting. However, the cost was mindless – or sometimes irrational – practice. For Rustin, ‘mindlessness is a defensive solution which unfortunately fits all too well with complex bureaucratic systems’ (p. 18). Instead, she argues that practitioners need to become *mindful* of their propensity to identify and counter-identify with extreme pain. This can be achieved by utilising affective rationality in training, supervision and consultation. In these contexts, affective rationality enables the professional to stand back, create mental space and examine his emotional domain of experience. It connects with Goldstein’s (1984) idea of the ego as that part of the personality which we use to test and connect with reality, manage emotional undercurrents and promote problem-solving strategies. It is also synonymous with Berne’s (2009) view of the ‘Adult’ component of the personality which executes rational analysis and emotional regulation. What is more, it links with Burgess’ (2005) idea of the ‘Winner’s Triangle’ (counterpoised with the ‘Drama Triangle’), where instead of playing out the roles of persecutor, rescuer and victim, the roles are transformed into assertion, caring and vulnerability. In this triadic set, self-awareness and emotional intelligence are developed.

The issue at stake, in all of this, is how a practitioner’s negative feeling states are acknowledged, understood, labelled and regulated in an enlightened and rational manner. Thus, the practitioner employs the rational, problem-solving part of the mind, examining the impact of the outer world as it connects with inner repression, ego-defences, emotional pain, trauma, and unconscious processes. The rational mind, in this context, aims for insight, illumination, and reflection. In particular, it attempts to gain clarity about the nature of transference in child protection. This is where the influence of past relationships in the service user’s life is brought into the here-and-now relationship with the social worker. More than this, affective-rationality attempts to attain an awareness of counter-transference whereby unresolved conflicts within the social worker are triggered and expressed in response to the client’s transference of their negative feeling states. This is what is meant by affective rationality. It builds on a ‘growing realisation that psychological processes considered to be purely cognitive or intellectual in fact depend on a synergy between cognition and emotion’ (Matthews et al, 2004, p. 542). Morrison

(2007) adds to this argument by suggesting that it is erroneous to put emotions on hold when engaging in rational decision-making; instead, emotional awareness and intelligence are integral to perception and analysis.

An understanding of object-relations theory (Greenberg & Mitchell, 2013), including attachment theory and how it makes sense of the emotional world and its relationship with outer objects, is a particularly helpful theoretical lens for appreciating the psychodynamics of complex child protection practice. The failure of individuals to make sense, rationally speaking, of their inner and outer worlds, and integrate discordant experiences of care, can lead to the projection of negativity. It can also hamper the capacity to make linkages between different events. Howe (2005; 2008), developing his work on attachment theory for social work practice, talks about the central importance of the emotionally intelligent social worker. For him, emotion is the ‘very essence’ of child and family social work as it affects both the service user and social worker’s thoughts and actions. Emotional intelligence involves an understanding of inner and outer ‘object-relations’, the centrality of human relationship, the need for empathy, and the attempt to reshape and reorder cognitions to control negative emotions. Having emotional intelligence fosters the practice of professional containment in child protection work. Containment is a way of accepting the other’s fraught emotions while returning care and solicitude to that person. Howe’s work in this field is a timely rejoinder to the manner in which technocracy has colonised practice in the UK.

We can conclude our case study at this point, considering how the affective-rational perspective can be practically utilised. Following the case conference, the social worker reflects deeply on the events following the child’s disclosure. The subsequent police investigation has revealed a harrowing catalogue of incidents indicating severe, intra-familial abuse over a prolonged period. With the benefit of hindsight, it is evident that there were subtle, oblique signs that were missed. A sense of guilt and self-doubt sets in. More than that, the sheer depravity of the alleged acts, and intense empathy for the child, impact on the social worker’s consciousness leading to mood swings, insomnia, intrusive

imagery, and mental fatigue. Such symptoms affect the social worker's confidence and ability to implement the risk management plan.

Fortunately, for the social worker, her team leader understands how a child's experience of trauma can be vicariously felt by the helper. Utilising an affective-rational mind-set, the team leader normalises the social worker's cognitive and affective reactions to the case. Acting as a container, he establishes a considerate, empathetic attunement with her thus enabling a cathartic release. Various support mechanisms and coping strategies are explored. A self-care plan is concocted. Over time, the team leader helps the social worker re-establish boundaries between herself and the family in question. As a consequence, the emotional contagion subsides freeing the social worker to focus on the challenges arising from the protection plan.

Conclusion: Towards an Holistic-Rational Perspective

My contention is that, when we draw together all four strands of rationality in child protection, we arrive at a *gestalt*: an emergent form of rationality that is greater than the sum of its parts. Here, the instrumental, critical, affective and communicative rationalities are brought into a synergy. The 'holistic-rational' perspective is the term given to this effect and gives rise to a number of applications in child protection.

First of all, holistic-rationality aims for a *balanced, explicit* application of each of the four forms of rationality in child protection. This is goes against the current over-application, or dominance, of the instrumental-rational perspective in many safeguarding approaches (Munro, 2011). A wide-eyed lens is therefore appropriated in child protection to examine child care concerns. However, rather than attempting to apply all perspectives at once, concurrently, and ending up in conceptual imbroglio, it may be more beneficial to apply them sequentially. In other words, a decision-making group (a case conference for instance) might utilise each form of rationality as part of a process of collectivised thinking. In this context, a case is examined systematically by all concerned using each form of rationality in turn. This is different from an adversarial use of rationality whereby one professional puts forward a thesis concerning risk, and another argues against it

through a counter-thesis. Group thinking means that each of the participants adopts the same type of rational thinking to adduce risk and then collectively moves on to apply one of the remaining forms.

Secondly, holistic rationality promulgates a wide-ranging reflection on facts, values, emotions, communication and process in child protection. Supervision is a key conduit for this type of reflection. Yet, supervision that focuses mainly on whether social workers have fulfilled required administrative functions, is most likely drawing only on the instrumental-rational perspective, important as it is. A supervisor can enlarge this focus, however, by posing Socratic questions (making use of the critical-rational perspective) about the nature of the alleged concerns; how they have been constructed; what premises have been developed about thresholds of harm; the evidence to support initial and subsequent formulations in assessment; and whether alternative hypotheses about the concerns, risks and needs of the family can be generated and supported by facts. Building on this appraisal, the supervisor might gently probe the emotional impact of the case (drawing on affective-rationality) being conscious of how care and control tensions in child protection practice can often stir up psychological ambivalence or splitting. Supervisors can further test the basis of the practitioner's validity claims about the case, whether ethical communication with parents has taken place and their perspectives considered, in an attempt to reach some form of consensual understanding (adopting communicative-rationality). Holistic rationality combines all four forms of rationally reflectively to reach an overall formulation on risk, need and the resources required to safeguard the child and promote her welfare.

A third dimension of holistic-rationality emerges. It gives equal weight to an analytical form of risk evaluation (with its emphasis on the use of formal logic and a conscious review of events) and its corollary, the experiential approach to risk evaluation (where intuitive predilections, experiential awareness and a sensitivity to personal affect, shape formulations about risk). In holistic-rationality, these two approaches work in parallel and are synergistic. Thus, in child protection, practitioners must rely not only on a considered rational analysis of facts but, equally, they must be sensitive to inner visceral stirrings

that may signal unmet needs or indeed dangers. The latter orientation may present as the very first reaction which guides information gathering and can therefore benefit risk analysis (Slovic et al., 2004). Both types of approach have strengths and biases but, when used together, are mutually enhancing (Damasio, 1994).

Fourthly, holistic-rationality emphasizes the importance of a psycho-dynamic understanding in child protection – how various blocks to recognition may be due, in part, to complex intra-psychic and relational processes and transactions. This is because the perspective explains how anxiety and ambivalence often emanate from unresolved care and control feelings in early life. It also raises the huge significance of attachment experience, defended behaviour, resistance and relational exchanges based on transference and counter-transference. Through enhancing the rational, ego component of our being, these areas can be approached sensitively with a service user by building up a therapeutic alliance and containment of painful emotion. Thus, in holistic rationality, two primary domains of being are examined: the intra-psychic and the relational.

Lastly, holistic-rationality can be used to consider the *situated* and *grounded* nature of risk practices in child and family social work. In this connection, Kemshall (2010) refers to how risk assessment is not a disembodied activity but one carried out in the every-day world of temporal and spatial contingencies. Knowing in social work is transferred to doing through being in *situ* (Lefevre, 2008). Relatedly, Flyvbjerg (1998) argues that in real life decision-making, rationality is context-dependent and that context is saturated by relationships of power. For him, ‘power has a rationality that rationality does not know’. Therefore, given this context, holistic rationality, with its wide-ranging purview, is a necessary tool for appraising how risk is embedded in real-life communication, emotional pain, value-dilemmas and organisational imperatives.

To conclude, as Ferguson (2005) says with prescience, ‘a striking feature of contemporary child protection discourse is its rationality’ (p. 782). Given this contention, I have argued that there are various types of rationality in social life and social work. My thesis is that the instrumental-rational type has become the dominant one in child

protection. It is a vital form of reasoning but only a partial response to child protection error and the management of risk. What is needed is an holistic rationality: one which embraces all of the different forms identified earlier; one which holds them all together in a creative tension. Without this holistic stance, the irrationality of rationality (Ritzer, 2011) can creep in; that is, one form colonising the others or subjugating them and, in so doing, militating against a rounded perspective. As human beings we are at our best when we respond to social life by using *all* of our faculties, for this is an evolutionary mechanism potentiating human problem-solving capacities and reducing error. At a time when the child protection system continues to face scrutiny from various quarters, it is incumbent on the social work profession to respond creatively, using all the resources inherent within consciousness and the mind.

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